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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS FOR MBROWN AND EEB/TPP/ABT
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SUBJECT: SOWING THE SEEDS OF A BIOTECH DISCUSSION IN VIETNAM

REF: A) 07 State 160639 (Biotech Outreach);
B) Hanoi 103 (Biotech Outreach Proposal)

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11. (U) SUMMARY: Mission Vietnam sponsored a series of biotechnology conferences that generated frank discussions among Vietnamese farmers, policymakers and academics about basic research and field testing, and led to calls from conference participants for the Government of Vietnam (GVN) to develop this sector as quickly as possible. The "Vietnam Biotech: Growing the Future" conferences, co-organized with the GVN, from September 29 through October 4, 2008, focused on how biotechnology can improve economic growth and provide benefits for farmers and consumers. Over 450 people attended the events held in urban and rural venues in northern and southern Vietnam, which received wide media coverage. END SUMMARY

TURNING POINT FOR VIETNAM BIOTECH

12. (U) The objective of the conferences, held in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Can Tho, and Vinh Phuc, was to raise awareness about the benefits of biotechnology for Vietnam and to encourage active development of the sector. As a leading agricultural producer and exporter, Vietnam has the potential to be among the leaders in biotechnology in such crops as soybean, corn and rice. To date there have been few opportunities for public debate of biotech issues. This a pivotal time for outreach as the GVN is in the process of finalizing key biotech regulations.

13. (U) The legal framework for biotechnology in Vietnam is still evolving and the implementing guidelines for practical applications remain unclear. While biotech research is underway in Vietnam, it does not have large-scale financial support. In the coming months the GVN will make critical decisions which will have a long-term impact on production and trade of biotech crops and products. The Mission-sponsored "Vietnam Biotech: Growing the Future" provided a much-needed public forum for many of these issues.

THE OUTCOME

14. (U) The four events drew over 450 participants. Scientists had the opportunity to publicly present their work and policymakers were able to directly address key biotech issues. Vietnamese biotech advocates were able to answer questions from the public and the media about the safety and value of biotechnology, as well as to propose ways to encourage and implement biotechnology. During the last conference, provincial agricultural authorities from Vinh Phuc officially volunteered to serve as the first site in Vietnam for biotech maize field trials.

MEDIA CAMPAIGN

¶15. (U) Media, participant, and public interest were high and enthusiastic. Three events attracted over 100 participants each, and 53 local agricultural officials joined discussions in Vinh Phuc.

Over 30 media representatives attended the four conferences, providing print, internet, and Vietnam TV coverage. Print journalists, reporters for websites and television stations covered the panel presentations and interviewed the speakers. Television interviews with the program speakers were aired for several days after the events.

¶16. (U) Media exposure and word-of-mouth generated so much additional interest in the conferences that post had to enlarge the capacity for each subsequent event. For example, after the first event in HCMC, agriculture students asked to participate, which doubled our expected audience in the second conference in Can Tho. Similarly, after the Hanoi conference, our local government hosts in Vinh Phuc Province doubled the number of participants.

¶17. (U) As part of the conference activities, Mission Vietnam is organizing a supplementary media campaign, which includes the publication of articles in local newspapers and the production of DVDs of the conference panels. Embassy Hanoi also translated and distributed Vietnamese copies of three Biotech related publications.

Follow-up media campaign activities include newspaper articles by Vietnamese biotech experts and more television coverage. In addition, Mission Vietnam posted coverage on the Embassy website and is exploring other web-based avenues for dissemination.

ENLISTING THE GOVERNMENT

¶18. (U) Working closely with GVN counterparts on the planning and

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implementation of all project activities promoted cooperation and insured that the Biotech Outreach activities had full support from the GVN. For example, preparation and distribution of information packets insured that every participant had full access to the program content and ideas. Those participant packets can also be shared with the institutions and universities of the attendees and highlight the contributions of local scientists and policymakers to the promotion of biotech in Vietnam.

CREATING EFFECTIVE CONFERENCES

¶19. (U) Mission Vietnam received special funding for conferences from EEB as part of the 2008 Biotech Outreach Strategy. Each conference featured Dr. Paul Teng, an internationally-renowned biotechnology development expert and Dean of Graduate Programs and Research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. He is also the Vice-Chairman of the Board of International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) and a member of the International Steering Committee, Public Research & Regulatory Initiative, established to provide a public sector research role in the Cartagena Biosafety Protocol. Mission Vietnam Econ staff organized all project activities and traveled to all program locations for implementation. Econ officers worked closely with the Mission's FAS, ESTH and PAS sections to maximize the impact of the outreach activities.

¶110. (U) Organizing the biotech outreach activities as a weeklong conference series rather than separate one-off events enhanced media coverage, heightened the profile of the activities and increased audience participation. Each event was designed for a particular audience, including scientists, academics, policymakers and farmers.

¶111. (U) COMMENT: "Vietnam Biotech: Growing the Future" reached a large and diverse audience at a critical time in Vietnam's consideration biotechnology and biotech crops. GVN officials praised the conferences for providing a public forum for Vietnamese researchers and biotech advocates that had not existed previously.

Post will continue to support Vietnamese biotech advocates through information sharing, facilitating discussions, and monitoring legislative and regulatory developments. END COMMENT

112. (U) This cable was coordinated with Congen HCMC.